

Other People's Children: North Lawndale and the South Side of Chicago

Almost anyone who visits in the schools of East St. Louis, even for a short time, comes away profoundly shaken. These are innocent children, after all. They have done nothing wrong. They have committed no crime. They are too young to have offended us in any way at all. One searches for some way to understand why a society as rich and, frequently, as generous as ours would leave these children in their penury and squalor for so long—and with so little public indignation. Is this just a strange mistake of history? Is it unusual? Is it an American anomaly? Even if the destitution and the racial segregation and the toxic dangers of the air and soil cannot be immediately addressed, why is it that we can't at least pour vast amounts of money, ingenuity and talent into public education for these children?

Admittedly, the soil cannot be de-leaded overnight, and the ruined spirits of the men who camp out in the mud and shacks close to the wire fencing of Monsanto can't be instantly restored to life, nor can the many illnesses these chil-

dren suffer suddenly be cured, nor can their asthma be immediately relieved. Why not, at least, give children in this city something so spectacular, so wonderful and special in their public schools that hundreds of them, maybe thousands, might be able somehow to soar up above the hopelessness, the clouds of smoke and sense of degradation all around them?

Every child, every mother, in this city is, to a degree, in the position of a supplicant for someone else's help. The city turns repeatedly to outside agencies—the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, the federal and Illinois EPA, the U.S. Congress, the Illinois State Board of Education, religious charities, health organizations, medical schools and educational foundations—soliciting help in much the way that African and Latin American nations beg for grants from agencies like AID. And yet we stop to tell ourselves: *These are Americans*. Why do we reduce them to this beggary—and why, particularly, in public education? Why not spend on children here at least what we would be investing in their education if they lived within a wealthy district like Winnetka, Illinois, or Cherry Hill, New Jersey, or Manhasset, Rye, or Great Neck in New York? Wouldn't this be natural behavior in an affluent society that seems to value fairness in so many other areas of life? Is fairness less important to Americans today than in some earlier times? Is it viewed as slightly tiresome and incompatible with hard-nosed values? What do Americans believe about equality?

"Drive west on the Eisenhower Expressway," writes the *Chicago Tribune*, "out past the hospital complex, and look south." Before your eyes are block after block of old, abandoned, gaping factories. "The overwhelming sensation is emptiness. . . . What's left is, literally, nothing."

This emptiness—"an industrial slum without the industry," a local resident calls it—is North Lawndale. The neighborhood, according to the *Tribune*, "has one bank, one supermarket, 48 state lottery agents . . . and 99 licensed bars and liquor stores." With only a single supermarket, food is of poor quality and overpriced. Martin Luther King, who lived in this neighborhood in 1966, said there was a 10-to-

20-percent "color tax" on produce, an estimate that still holds true today. With only a single bank, there are few loans available for home repair; private housing therefore has deteriorated quickly.

According to the 1980 census, 58 percent of men and women 17 and older in North Lawndale had no jobs. The 1990 census is expected to show no improvement. Between 1960 and 1970, as the last white families left the neighborhood, North Lawndale lost three quarters of its businesses, one quarter of its jobs. In the next ten years, 80 percent of the remaining jobs in manufacturing were lost.

"People carry a lot of crosses here," says Reverend Jim Wolff, who directs a mission church not far from one of the deserted factories. "God's beautiful people live here in the midst of hell."

As the factories have moved out, he says, the street gangs have moved in. Driving with me past a sprawling red-brick complex that was once the world headquarters of Sears, Roebuck, he speaks of the increasing economic isolation of the neighborhood: "Sears is gone. International Harvester is gone. Sunbeam is gone. Western Electric has moved out. The Vice Lords, the Disciples and the Latin Kings have, in a sense, replaced them."

"With the arrival of the gangs there is, of course, more violence and death. I buried a young man 21 years old a week ago. Most of the people that I bury are between the ages of 18 and 30."

He stops the car next to a weed-choked lot close to the corner of Sixteenth and Hamlin. "Dr. King," he says, "lived on this corner." There is no memorial. The city, I later learn, flattened the building after Dr. King moved out. A broken truck now occupies the place where Dr. King resided. From an open side door of the truck, a very old man is selling pizza slices. Next door is a store called Jumbo Liquors. A menacing group of teen-age boys is standing on the corner of the lot where Dr. King lived with his family. "Kids like these will kill each other over nothing—for a warm-up jacket," says the pastor.

"There are good people in this neighborhood," he says,

"determined and persistent and strong-minded people who have character and virtues you do not see everywhere. You say to yourself, 'There's something here that's being purified by pain.' All the veneers, all the façades, are burnt away and you see something genuine and beautiful that isn't often found among the affluent. I see it in children—in the youngest children sometimes. Beautiful sweet natures. It's as if they are refined by their adversity. But you cannot sentimentalize. The odds they face are hellish and, for many, many people that I know, life here is simply unendurable."

"Dr. King once said that he had met his match here in Chicago. He said that he faced more bigotry and hatred here than anywhere he'd been in the Deep South. Now he's gone. The weeds have overgrown his memory. I sometimes wonder if the kids who spend their lives out on that corner would be shocked, or even interested, to know that he had lived there once. If you told them, I suspect you'd get a shrug at most. . . ."

On a clear October day in 1990, the voices of children in the first-floor hallway of the Mary McLeod Bethune School in North Lawndale are as bright and optimistic as the voices of small children anywhere. The school, whose students are among the poorest in the city, serves one of the neighborhoods in which the infant death rate is particularly high. Nearly 1,000 infants die within these very poor Chicago neighborhoods each year. An additional 3,000 infants are delivered with brain damage or with other forms of neurological impairment. But, entering a kindergarten classroom on this autumn morning, one would have no sense that anything was wrong. Kindergarten classes almost anywhere are cheerful places, and whatever damage may already have been done to children here is not initially apparent to a visitor.

When the children lie down on the floor to have their naps, I sit and watch their movements and their breathing. A few of them fall asleep at once, but others are restless and three little boys keep poking one another when the teacher looks away. Many tiny coughs and whispers interrupt the silence for a while.

The teacher is not particularly gentle. She snaps at the ones who squirm around—"Relax!" and "Sleep!"—and forces down their arms and knees.

A little boy lying with his head close to my feet looks up, with his eyes wide open, at the ceiling. Another, lying on his stomach, squints at me with one eye while the other remains closed. Two little girls, one in blue jeans, one in purple tights, are sound asleep.

The room is sparse: a large and clean but rather cheerless space. There are very few of those manipulable objects and bright-colored shelves and boxes that adorn suburban kindergarten classrooms. The only decorations on the walls are posters supplied by companies that market school materials: "Winter," "Spring," "Summer," "Autumn," "Zoo Animals," "Community Helpers." Nothing the children or teacher made themselves.

As the minutes pass, most of the children seem to sleep, some of them with their arms flung out above their heads, others with their hands beneath their cheeks, though four or five are wide awake and stare with boredom at the ceiling.

On the door is a classroom chart ("Watch us grow!" it says) that measures every child's size and weight. Nakisha, according to the chart, is 38 inches tall and weighs 40 pounds. Lashonda, is 42 inches and weighs 45. Seneca is only 36 inches tall. He weighs only 38.

After 30 minutes pass, the teacher tells the children to sit up. Five of the boys who were most restless suddenly are sound asleep. The others sit up. The teacher tells them, "Folded hands!" They fold their hands. "Wiggle your toes!" They wiggle their toes. "Touch your nose!" They touch their noses.

The teacher questions them about a trip they made the week before. "Where did we go?" The children answer, "Farm!" "What did we see?" The children answer, "Sheep!" "What did we feed them?" A child yells out, "Soup!" The teacher reproves him: "You weren't there! What is the right answer?" The other children answer, "Corn!"

In a somewhat mechanical way, the teacher lifts a picture book of Mother Goose and flips the pages as the children sit before her on the rug.

"Mary had a little lamb, its fleece was white as snow. . . . Old Mother Hubbard went to the cupboard to fetch her poor dog a bone. . . . Jack and Jill went up the hill. . . . This little piggy went to market. . . ."

The children recite the verses with her as she turns the pages of the book. She's not very warm or animated as she does it, but the children are obedient and seem to like the fun of showing that they know the words. The book looks worn and old, as if the teacher's used it many, many years, and it shows no signs of adaptation to the race of the black children in the school. Mary is white. Old Mother Hubbard is white. Jack is white. Jill is white. Little Jack Horner is white. Mother Goose is white. Only Mother Hubbard's dog is black.

"Baa, baa, black sheep," the teacher reads, "have you any wool?" The children answer: "Yessir, yessir, three bags full. One for my master. . . ." The master is white. The sheep are black.

Four little boys are still asleep on the green rug an hour later when I leave the room. I stand at the door and look at the children, most of whom are sitting at a table now to have their milk. Nine years from now, most of these children will go on to Manley High School, an enormous, ugly building just a block away that has a graduation rate of only 38 percent. Twelve years from now, by junior year of high school, if the neighborhood statistics hold true for these children, 14 of these 23 boys and girls will have dropped out of school. Fourteen years from now, four of these kids, at most, will go to college. Eighteen years from now, one of those four may graduate from college, but three of the 12 boys in this kindergarten will already have spent time in prison.

If one stands here in this kindergarten room and does not know these things, the moment seems auspicious. But if one knows the future that awaits them, it is terrible to see their eyes look up at you with friendliness and trust—to see this and to know what is in store for them.

In a fifth grade classroom on the third floor of the school, the American flag is coated with chalk and bunched around a pole above a blackboard with no writing on it. There are a couple of pictures of leaves against the window-

panes but nothing like the richness and the novelty and fullness of expression of the children's creativity that one would see in better schools where principals insist that teachers fill their rooms with art and writing by the children. The teacher is an elderly white woman with a solid bun of sensible gray hair and a depleted grayish mood about her. Among the 30 children in the room, the teacher says that several, all of whom are black, are classified "learning disabled."

The children are doing a handwriting lesson when I enter. On a board at the back of the room the teacher has written a line of letters in the standard cursive script. The children sit at their desks and fill entire pages with these letters. It is the kind of lesson that is generally done in second grade in a suburban school. The teacher seems bored by the lesson, and the children seem to feel this and compound her boredom with their own. Next she does a social studies lesson on the Bering Strait and spends some time in getting the class to give a definition of a "strait." About half of the children pay attention. The others don't talk or interrupt or fidget. They are well enough behaved but seem sedated by the teacher's voice.

Another fifth grade teacher stops me in the corridor to ask me what I'm doing in the building. He's 50 years old, he tells me, and grew up here in North Lawndale when it was a middle-class white neighborhood but now lives in the suburbs. "I have a low fifth grade," he says without enthusiasm, then—although he scarcely knows me—launches into an attack upon the principal, the neighborhood and the school.

"It's all a game," he says. "Keep them in class for seven years and give them a diploma if they make it to eighth grade. They can't read, but give them the diploma. The parents don't know what's going on. They're satisfied."

When I ask him if the lack of money and resources is a problem in the school, he looks amused by this. "Money would be helpful but it's not the major factor," he replies. "The parents are the problem."

The principal, Warren Franczyk, later tells me this: "Teachers are being dumped from high school jobs because of low enrollment. But if they've got tenure they cannot be fired so we get them here. I've got two of them as subs right

now and one as a permanent teacher. He's not used to children of this age and can't control them. But I have no choice."

The city runs a parallel system of selective schools—some of which are known as "magnet" schools—and these schools, the principal tells me, do not have the staffing problems that he faces. "They can select their teachers and their pupils. So it represents a drain on us. They attract the more sophisticated families, and it leaves us with less motivated children."

Chicago, he tells me, does not have a junior high school system. Students begin Bethune in kindergarten and remain here through eighth grade. Eighth grade graduation, here as elsewhere in Chicago, is regarded as a time for celebration, much as twelfth grade graduation would be celebrated in the suburbs. So there are parties, ball gowns and tuxedos, everything that other kids would have at high school graduation. "For more than half our children," says the principal, "this is the last thing they will have to celebrate."

Even in the most unhappy schools there are certain classes that stand out like little islands of excitement, energy and hope. One of these classes is a combination fifth and sixth grade at Bethune, taught by a woman, maybe 40 years of age, named Corla Hawkins.

The classroom is full of lively voices when I enter. The children are at work, surrounded by a clutter of big dictionaries, picture books and gadgets, science games and plants and colorful milk cartons, which the teacher purchased out of her own salary. An oversized Van Gogh collection, open to a print of a sunflower, is balanced on a table-ledge next to a fish tank and a turtle tank. Next to the table is a rocking chair. Handwritten signs are on all sides: "Getting to know you," "Keeping you safe," and, over a wall that holds some artwork by the children, "Mrs. Hawkins's Academy of Fine Arts." Near the windows, the oversized leaves of several wild-looking plants partially cover rows of novels, math books, and a new World Book Encyclopedia. In the opposite corner is a "Science Learning Board" that holds small packets which contain bulb sockets, bulbs and wires, lenses, magnets, bal-

ance scales and pliers. In front of the learning board is a microscope. Several rugs are thrown around the floor. On another table are a dozen soda bottles sealed with glue and lying sideways, filled with colored water.

The room looks like a cheerful circus tent. In the center of it all, within the rocking chair, and cradling a newborn in her arms, is Mrs. Hawkins.

The 30 children in the class are seated in groups of six at five of what she calls "departments." Each department is composed of six desks pushed together to create a table. One of the groups is doing math, another something that they call "math strategy." A third is doing reading. Of the other two groups, one is doing something they describe as "mathematics art"—painting composites of geometric shapes—and the other is studying "careers," which on this morning is a writing exercise about successful business leaders who began their lives in poverty. Near the science learning board a young-looking woman is preparing a new lesson that involves a lot of gadgets she has taken from a closet.

"This woman," Mrs. Hawkins tells me, "is a parent. She wanted to help me. So I told her, 'If you don't have somebody to keep your baby, bring the baby here. I'll be the mother. I can do it.'"

As we talk, a boy who wears big glasses brings his book to her and asks her what the word *salvation* means. She shows him how to sound it out, then tells him, "Use your dictionary if you don't know what it means." When a boy at the reading table argues with the boy beside him, she yells out, "You ought to be ashamed. You woke my baby."

After 15 minutes she calls out that it is time to change their tables. The children get up and move to new departments. As each group gets up to move to the next table, one child stays behind to introduce the next group to the lesson.

"This is the point of it," she says. "I'm teaching them three things. Number one: self-motivation. Number two: self-esteem. Number three: you help your sister and your brother. I tell them they're responsible for one another. I give no grades in the first marking period because I do not want them to be too competitive. Second marking period, you get your grade on what you've taught your neighbors at

your table. Third marking period, I team them two-and-two. You get the same grade as your partner. Fourth marking period, I tell them, 'Every fish swims on its own.' But I wait a while for that. The most important thing for me is that they teach each other. . . .

"All this stuff"—she gestures at the clutter in the room—"I bought myself because it never works to order things through the school system. I bought the VCR. I bought the rocking chair at a flea market. I got these books here for ten cents apiece at a flea market. I bought that encyclopedia—" she points at the row of World Books—"so that they can do their research right here in this room."

I ask her if the class reads well enough to handle these materials. "Most of them can read some of these books. What they cannot read, another child can read to them," she says.

"I tell the parents, 'Any time your child says, 'I don't have no homework,' call me up. Call me at home.' Because I give them homework every night and weekends too. Holidays I give them extra. Every child in this classroom has my phone."

Cradling the infant in her lap, she says, "I got to buy a playpen."

The bottles of colored water, she explains, are called "wave bottles." The children make them out of plastic soda bottles which they clean and fill with water and food coloring and seal with glue. She takes one in her hand and rolls it slowly to and fro. "It shows them how waves form," she says. "I let them keep them at their desks. Some of them hold them in their hands while they're at work. It seems to calm them: seeing the water cloud up like a storm and then grow clear. . . .

"I take them outside every day during my teacher-break. On Saturdays we go to places like the art museum. Tuesdays, after school, I coach the drill team. Friday afternoons I tutor parents for their GED [high school equivalency exam]. If you're here this afternoon, I do the gospel choir."

When I ask about her own upbringing, she replies, "I went to school here in Chicago. My mother believed I was a 'gifted' child, but the system did not challenge me and I was bored at school. Fortunately one of my mother's neighbors

was a teacher and she used to talk to me and help me after school. If it were not for her I doubt that I'd have thought that I could go to college. I promised myself I would return that favor."

At the end of class I go downstairs to see the principal, and then return to a second-floor room to see the gospel choir in rehearsal. When I arrive, they've already begun. Thirty-five children, ten of whom are boys, are standing in rows before a piano player. Next to the piano, Mrs. Hawkins stands and leads them through the words. The children range in age from sixth and seventh graders to three second graders and three tiny children, one of whom is Mrs. Hawkins's daughter, who are kindergarten pupils in the school.

They sing a number of gospel songs with Mrs. Hawkins pointing to each group—soprano, alto, bass—when it is their turn to join in. When they sing, "I love you, Lord," their voices lack the energy she wants. She interrupts and shouts at them, "Do you love Him? Do you?" They sing louder. The children look as if they're riveted to her directions.

"This next song," she says, "I dreamed about this. This song is my favorite."

The piano begins. The children start to clap their hands. When she gives the signal they begin to sing:

Clap your hands!

Stamp your feet!

Get on up

Out of your seats!

Help me

Lift 'em up, Lord!

Help me

Lift 'em up!

When a child she calls "Reverend Joe" does not come in at the right note, Mrs. Hawkins stops and says to him: "I thought you told me you were saved!"

The children smile. The boy called "Reverend Joe"

stands up a little straighter. Then the piano starts again. The sound of children clapping and then stamping with the music fills the room. Mrs. Hawkins waves her arms. Then, as the children start, she also starts to sing.

Help me lift 'em up, Lord!

Help me lift 'em up!

There are wonderful teachers such as Corla Hawkins almost everywhere in urban schools, and sometimes a number of such teachers in a single school. It is tempting to focus on these teachers and, by doing this, to paint a hopeful portrait of the good things that go on under adverse conditions. There is, indeed, a growing body of such writing; and these books are sometimes very popular, because they are consoling.

The rationale behind much of this writing is that pedagogic problems in our cities are not chiefly matters of injustice, inequality or segregation, but of insufficient information about teaching strategies: If we could simply learn "what works" in Corla Hawkins's room, we'd then be in a position to repeat this all over Chicago and in every other system.

But what is unique in Mrs. Hawkins's classroom is not what she does but who she is. Warmth and humor and contagious energy cannot be replicated and cannot be written into any standardized curriculum. If they could, it would have happened long ago; for wonderful teachers have been heroized in books and movies for at least three decades. And the problems of Chicago are, in any case, not those of insufficient information. If Mrs. Hawkins's fellow fifth grade teachers simply needed information, they could get it easily by walking 20 steps across the hall and visiting her room. The problems are systemic: The number of teachers over 60 years of age in the Chicago system is twice that of the teachers under 30. The salary scale, too low to keep exciting, youthful teachers in the system, leads the city to rely on low-paid subs, who represent more than a quarter of Chicago's teaching force. "We have teachers," Mrs. Hawkins says, "who

only bother to come in three days a week. One of these teachers comes in usually around nine-thirty. You ask her how she can expect the kids to care about their education if the teacher doesn't even come until nine-thirty. She answers you, 'It makes no difference. Kids like these aren't going anywhere.' The school board thinks it's saving money on the subs. I tell them, 'Pay now or pay later.'"

But even substitute teachers in Chicago are quite frequently in short supply. On an average morning in Chicago, 5,700 children in 190 classrooms come to school to find they have no teacher. The number of children who have no teachers on a given morning in Chicago's public schools is nearly twice the student population of New Trier High School in nearby Winnetka.

"We have been in this class a whole semester," says a 15-year-old at Du Sable High, one of Chicago's poorest secondary schools, "and they still can't find us a teacher."

A student in auto mechanics at Du Sable says he'd been in class for 16 weeks before he learned to change a tire. His first teacher quit at the beginning of the year. Another teacher slept through most of the semester. He would come in, the student says, and tell the students, "You can talk. Just keep it down." Soon he would be asleep.

"Let's be real," the student says. "Most of us ain't going to college. . . . We could have used a class like this."

The shortage of teachers finds its parallel in a shortage of supplies. A chemistry teacher at the school reports that he does not have beakers, water, bunsen burners. He uses a popcorn popper as a substitute for a bunsen burner, and he cuts down plastic soda bottles to make laboratory dishes.

Many of these schools make little effort to instruct their failing students. "If a kid comes in not reading," says an English teacher at Chicago's South Shore High, "he goes out not reading."

Another teacher at the school, where only 170 of 800 freshmen graduate with their class, indicates that the dropout rate makes teaching easier. "We lose all the dregs by the second year," he says.

"We're a general high school," says the head of counseling at Chicago's Calumet High School. "We have second- and

third-grade readers. . . . We hope to do better, but we won't die if we don't."

At Bowen High School, on the South Side of Chicago, students have two or three "study halls" a day, in part to save the cost of teachers. "Not much studying goes on in study hall," a supervising teacher says. "I let the students play cards. . . . I figure they might get some math skills out of it."

At the Lathrop Elementary School, a short walk from the corner lot where Dr. King resided in North Lawndale, there are no hoops on the basketball court and no swings in the playground. For 21 years, according to the *Chicago Tribune*, the school has been without a library. Library books, which have been piled and abandoned in the lunch room of the school, have "sprouted mold," the paper says. Some years ago the school received the standard reading textbooks out of sequence: The second workbook in the reading program came to the school before the first. The principal, uncertain what to do with the wrong workbook, was told by school officials it was "all right to work backwards. . . ."

This degree of equanimity in failure, critics note, has led most affluent parents in Chicago to avoid the public system altogether. The school board president in 1989, although a teacher and administrator in the system for three decades, did not send his children to the public schools. Nor does Mayor Richard Daley, Jr., nor did any of the previous four mayors who had school-age children.

"Nobody in his right mind," says one of the city's aldermen, "would send [his] kids to public school."

Many suburban legislators representing affluent school districts use terms such as "sinkhole" when opposing funding for Chicago's children. "We can't keep throwing money," said Governor Thompson in 1988, "into a black hole."

The *Chicago Tribune* notes that, when this phrase is used, people hasten to explain that it is not intended as a slur against the race of many of Chicago's children. "But race," says the *Tribune*, "never is far from the surface. . . ."

As spring comes to Chicago, the scarcity of substitutes grows more acute. On Mondays and Fridays in early May, nearly 18,000 children—the equivalent of all the elementary

students in suburban Glencoe, Wilmette, Glenview, Kenilworth, Winnetka, Deerfield, Highland Park and Evanston—are assigned to classes with no teacher.

In this respect, the city's dropout rate of nearly 50 percent is regarded by some people as a blessing. If over 200,000 of Chicago's total student population of 440,000 did not disappear during their secondary years, it is not clear who would teach them.

In 1989, Chicago spent some \$5,500 for each student in its secondary schools. This may be compared to an investment of some \$8,500 to \$9,000 in each high school student in the highest-spending suburbs to the north. Stated in the simplest terms, this means that any high school class of 30 children in Chicago received approximately \$90,000 less each year than would have been spent on them if they were pupils of a school such as New Trier High.

The difference in spending between very wealthy suburbs and poor cities is not always as extreme as this in Illinois. When relative student needs, however, have been factored into the discussion, the disparities in funding are enormous. Equity, after all, does not mean simply equal funding. Equal funding for unequal needs is not equality. The need is greater in Chicago, and its children, if they are to have approximately equal opportunities, need more than the children who attend New Trier. Seen in this light, the \$90,000 annual difference is quite startling.

Lack of money is not the only problem in Chicago, but the gulf in funding we have seen is so remarkable and seems so blatantly unfair that it strikes many thoughtful citizens at first as inexplicable. How can it be that inequalities as great as these exist in neighboring school districts?

The answer is found, at least in part, in the arcane machinery by which we finance public education. Most public schools in the United States depend for their initial funding on a tax on local property. There are also state and federal funding sources, and we will discuss them later, but the property tax is the decisive force in shaping inequality. The property tax depends, of course, upon the taxable value of one's home and that of local industries. A typical wealthy suburb in which homes are often worth more than \$400,000

draws upon a larger tax base in proportion to its student population than a city occupied by thousands of poor people. Typically, in the United States, very poor communities place high priority on education, and they often tax themselves at higher rates than do the very affluent communities. But, even if they tax themselves at several times the rate of an extremely wealthy district, they are likely to end up with far less money for each child in their schools.

Because the property tax is counted as a tax deduction by the federal government, home-owners in a wealthy suburb get back a substantial portion of the money that they spend to fund their children's schools—effectively, a federal subsidy for an unequal education. Home-owners in poor districts get this subsidy as well, but, because their total tax is less, the subsidy is less. The mortgage interest that home-owners pay is also treated as a tax deduction—in effect, a second federal subsidy. These subsidies, as I have termed them, are considerably larger than most people understand. In 1984, for instance, property-tax deductions granted by the federal government were \$9 billion. An additional \$23 billion in mortgage-interest deductions were provided to home-owners: a total of some \$32 billion. Federal grants to local schools, in contrast, totaled only \$7 billion, and only part of this was earmarked for low-income districts. Federal policy, in this respect, increases the existing gulf between the richest and the poorest schools.

All of these disparities are also heightened, in the case of larger cities like Chicago, by the disproportionate number of entirely tax-free institutions—colleges and hospitals and art museums, for instance—that are sited in such cities. In some cities, according to Jonathan Wilson, former chairman of the Council of Urban Boards of Education, 30 percent or more of the potential tax base is exempt from taxes, compared to as little as 3 percent in the adjacent suburbs. Suburbanites, of course, enjoy the use of these nonprofit, tax-free institutions; and, in the case of private colleges and universities, they are far *more* likely to enjoy their use than are the residents of inner cities.

Cities like Chicago face the added problem that an overly large portion of their limited tax revenues must be

diverted to meet nonschool costs that wealthy suburbs do not face, or only on a far more modest scale. Police expenditures are higher in crime-ridden cities than in most suburban towns. Fire department costs are also higher where dilapidated housing, often with substandard wiring, and arson-for-profit are familiar problems. Public health expenditures are also higher where poor people cannot pay for private hospitals. All of these expenditures compete with those for public schools. So the districts that face the toughest challenges are also likely to be those that have the fewest funds to meet their children's needs.

Many people, even those who view themselves as liberals on other issues, tend to grow indignant, even rather agitated, if invited to look closely at these inequalities. "Life isn't fair," one parent in Winnetka answered flatly when I pressed the matter. "Wealthy children also go to summer camp. All summer. Poor kids maybe not at all. Or maybe, if they're lucky, for two weeks. Wealthy children have the chance to go to Europe and they have the access to good libraries, encyclopedias, computers, better doctors, nicer homes. Some of my neighbors send their kids to schools like Exeter and Groton. Is government supposed to equalize these things as well?"

But government, of course, does not assign us to our homes, our summer camps, our doctors—or to Exeter. It does assign us to our public schools. Indeed, it forces us to go to them. Unless we have the wealth to pay for private education, we are compelled by law to go to public school—and to the public school in our district. Thus the state, by requiring attendance but refusing to require equity, effectively requires inequality. Compulsory inequity, perpetuated by state law, too frequently condemns our children to unequal lives.

In Illinois, as elsewhere in America, local funds for education raised from property taxes are supplemented by state contributions and by federal funds, although the federal contribution is extremely small, constituting only 6 percent of total school expenditures. State contributions represent approximately half of local school expenditures in the United States; although intended to make up for local wealth disparities, they have seldom been sufficient to

achieve this goal. Total yearly spending—local funds combined with state assistance and the small amount that comes from Washington—ranges today in Illinois from \$2,100 on a child in the poorest district to above \$10,000 in the richest. The system, writes John Coons, a professor of law at Berkeley University, "bears the appearance of calculated unfairness."

There is a belief advanced today, and in some cases by conservative black authors, that poor children and particularly black children should not be allowed to hear too much about these matters. If they learn how much less they are getting than rich children, we are told, this knowledge may induce them to regard themselves as "victims," and such "victim-thinking," it is argued, may then undermine their capability to profit from whatever opportunities may actually exist. But this is a matter of psychology—or strategy—and not reality. The matter, in any case, is academic since most adolescents in the poorest neighborhoods learn very soon that they are getting less than children in the wealthier school districts. They see suburban schools on television and they see them when they travel for athletic competitions. It is a waste of time to worry whether we should tell them something they could tell to us. About injustice, most poor children in America cannot be fooled.

Children, of course, don't understand at first that they are being cheated. They come to school with a degree of faith and optimism, and they often seem to thrive during the first few years. It is sometimes not until the third grade that their teachers start to see the warning signs of failure. By the fourth grade many children see it too.

"These kids are aware of their failures," says a fourth grade teacher in Chicago. "Some of them act like the game's already over."

By fifth or sixth grade, many children demonstrate their loss of faith by staying out of school. The director of a social service agency in Chicago's Humboldt Park estimates that 10 percent of the 12- and 13-year-old children that he sees are out of school for all but one or two days every two weeks. The route from truancy to full-fledged dropout status is di-

rect and swift. Reverend Charles Kyle, a professor at Loyola University, believes that 10 percent of students in Chicago drop out prior to their high school years, usually after seventh or eighth grade—an estimate that I have also heard from several teachers. This would put the city's actual dropout rate, the *Chicago Tribune* estimates, at "close to 60 percent."

Even without consideration of these early dropouts or of the *de facto* dropouts who show up at school a couple of times a month but still are listed as enrolled—excluding all of this and simply going by official school board numbers—the attrition rates in certain of the poorest neighborhoods are quite remarkable. For children who begin their school career at Andersen Elementary School, for instance, the high school dropout rate is 76 percent. For those who begin at the McKinley School, it is 81 percent. For those who start at Woodson Elementary School, the high school dropout rate is 86 percent. These schools—which Fred Hess of the Chicago Panel on School Policy and Finance, a respected watchdog group, calls "dumping grounds" for kids with special problems—are among the city's worst; but, even for children who begin their schooling at Bethune and then go on to nearby Manley High, the dropout rate, as we have seen, is 62 percent.

Not all of the kids who get to senior year and finish it and graduate, however, will have reading skills at high school level. Citywide, 27 percent of high school graduates read at the eighth grade level or below; and a large proportion of these students read at less than sixth grade level. Adding these children to the many dropouts who have never learned to read beyond the grade-school level, we may estimate that nearly half the kindergarten children in Chicago's public schools will exit school as marginal illiterates.

Reading levels are the lowest in the poorest schools. In a survey of the 18 high schools with the highest rates of poverty within their student populations, Designs for Change, a research center in Chicago, notes that only 3.5 percent of students graduate and also read up to the national norm. Some 6,700 children enter ninth grade in these 18 schools each year. Only 300 of these students, says Don

Moore, director of Designs for Change, "both graduate and read at or above the national average." Those very few who graduate and go to college rarely read well enough to handle college-level courses. At the city's community colleges, which receive most of their students from Chicago's public schools, the noncompletion rate is 97 percent. Of 35,000 students working toward degrees in the community colleges that serve Chicago, only 1,000 annually complete the program and receive degrees.

Looking at these failure rates again—and particularly at the reading scores of high school graduates—it is difficult to know what argument a counselor can make to tell a failing student that she ought to stay in school, except perhaps to note that a credential will, statistically, improve her likelihood of finding work. In strictly pedagogic terms, the odds of failure for a student who starts out at Woodson Elementary School, and then continues at a nonselective high school, are approximately ten to one. The odds of learning math and reading on the street are probably as good or even better. The odds of finding a few moments of delight, or maybe even happiness, outside these dreary schools are better still. For many, many students at Chicago's nonselective high schools, it is hard to know if a decision to drop out of school, no matter how much we discourage it, is not, in fact, a logical decision.

The one great exception in Chicago is the situation that exists for children who can win admission to the magnet or selective schools. The *Chicago Tribune* has called the magnet system, in effect, "a private school system . . . operated in the public schools." Very poor children, excluded from this system, says the *Tribune*, are "even more isolated" as a consequence of the removal of the more successful students from their midst.

The magnet system is, not surprisingly, highly attractive to the more sophisticated parents, disproportionately white and middle class, who have the ingenuity and, now and then, political connections to obtain admission for their children. It is also viewed by some of its defenders as an ideal way to hold white people in the public schools by offering them "choices" that resemble what they'd find in private educa-

tion. "Those the system chooses to save," says the *Tribune*, "are the brightest youngsters, selected by race, income and achievement" for "magnet schools where teachers are hand-picked" and which "operate much like private institutions."

Children who have had the benefits of preschool and one of the better elementary schools are at a great advantage in achieving entrance to selective high schools; but an even more important factor seems to be the social class and education level of their parents. This is the case because the system rests on the initiative of parents. The poorest parents, often the products of inferior education, lack the information access and the skills of navigation in an often hostile and intimidating situation to channel their children to the better schools, obtain the applications, and (perhaps a little more important) help them to get ready for the necessary tests and then persuade their elementary schools to recommend them. So, even in poor black neighborhoods, it tends to be children of the less poor and the better educated who are likely to break through the obstacles and win admission.

The system has the surface aspects of a meritocracy, but merit in this case is predetermined by conditions that are closely tied to class and race. While some defend it as, in theory, "the survival of the fittest," it is more accurate to call it the survival of the children of the fittest—or of the most favored. Similar systems exist in every major city. They are defended stoutly by those who succeed in getting into the selective schools.

The parallel system extends to elementary schools as well. A recent conflict around one such school illustrates the way the system pits the middle class against the poor. A mostly middle-income condominium development was built close to a public housing project known as Hilliard Homes. The new development, called Dearborn Park, attracted a number of young professionals, many of whom were fairly affluent white people, who asked the school board to erect a new school for their children. This request was honored and the South Loop Elementary School was soon constructed. At this point a bitter struggle ensued. The question: Who would get to go to the new school?

The parents from Dearborn Park insist that, if the

school is attended by the children from the projects—these are the children who have lived there all along—the standards of the school will fall. The school, moreover, has a special "fine arts" magnet program; middle-class children, drawn to the school from other sections of Chicago, are admitted. So the effort to keep out the kids who live right in the neighborhood points up the class and racial factors. The city, it is noted, had refused to build a new school for the project children when they were the only children in the neighborhood. Now that a new school has been built, they find themselves excluded.

The Dearborn parents have the political power to obtain agreement from the Board of Education to enter their children beginning in kindergarten but to keep the Hilliard children out until third grade—by which time, of course, the larger numbers of these poorer children will be at a disadvantage and will find it hard to keep up with the children who were there since kindergarten. In the interim, according to the *New York Times*, the younger children from the project are obliged to go to class within "a temporary branch school" in "a small, prefabricated metal building surrounded on three sides by junkyards."

The Chicago Panel on Public School Policy and Finance tells the press that it "is only fair" to let the kids from Hilliard Homes share in the resources "that the middle-class kids enjoy." The panel also notes that poorer children do not tend to bring the top kids down. "It is more likely that the high-achieving kids will bring the others up." But the truth is that few middle-class parents in Chicago, or in any other city, honestly believe this. They see the poorer children as a tide of mediocrity that threatens to engulf them. They are prepared to see those children get their schooling in a metal prefab in a junkyard rather than admit them to the beautiful new school erected for their own kids.

The conflict around South Loop Elementary in Chicago helps to illustrate some of the reasons for the reservations that black leaders sometimes voice about the prospect of a fully implemented plan for "schools of choice"—a notion strongly favored by the White House and, particularly, by Mr. Bush: If the children of the Hilliard project are success-

fully excluded from the magnet school across the street, how much harder will it be to get those children into magnet schools in other sections of the city? And will those children "choose" to go to "schools of choice" if it is made clear they are not wanted? This is an example of the ways that people may be taught to modify and to restrict their choices. The parents, of course, conditioned already by a lifetime of such lessons, may not even need to have their dreams further restricted. The energy to break out of their isolation may have atrophied already.

School boards think that, if they offer the same printed information to all parents, they have made choice equally accessible. That is not true, of course, because the printed information won't be read, or certainly will not be scrutinized aggressively, by parents who can't read or who read very poorly. But, even if a city could contrive a way to get the basic facts disseminated widely, can it disseminate audacity as well? Can it disseminate the limitless horizons of the middle class to those who have been trained to keep their eyes close to ground?

People can only choose among the things they've heard of. That is one problem that a "choice" plan must confront. But it is no less true that they can only choose the things they think they have a right to and the things they have some reason to believe they will receive. People who have forever been turned down by neighborhoods where they have looked for housing and by hospitals where they have looked for care when they were ill are not likely to have hopeful expectations when it comes to public schools.

The White House, in advancing the agenda for a "choice" plan, rests its faith on market mechanisms. What reason have the black and very poor to lend their credence to a market system that has proved so obdurate and so resistant to their pleas at every turn? Placing the burden on the individual to break down doors in finding better education for a child is attractive to conservatives because it reaffirms their faith in individual ambition and autonomy. But to ask an individual to break down doors that we have chained and bolted in advance of his arrival is unfair.

There are conscientious people who believe that certain

types of "choice" within the public schools can help to stimulate variety and foster deeper feelings of empowerment in parents. There are also certain models—in East Harlem in New York, for instance—which suggest that this is sometimes possible; but these models are the ones that also place a high priority on not excluding children of the less successful and less knowledgeable parents and, in the East Harlem situation, they are also models that grew out of social activism, and their faculty and principals continue to address the overarching inequalities that render their experiment almost unique. Without these countervailing forces—and they are not often present—"choice" plans of the kind the White House has proposed threaten to compound the present fact of racial segregation with the added injury of caste discrimination, further isolating those who, like the kids at Hilliard Homes, have been forever, as it seems, consigned to places *nobody* would choose if he had any choice at all.

In a system where the better teachers and the more successful students are attracted to the magnet and selective schools, neighborhood schools must settle for the rest. "I take anything that walks in," says the principal of Goudy Elementary School.

Far from the worst school in Chicago, Goudy's building is nonetheless depressing. According to Bonita Brodt, a writer for the *Chicago Tribune* who spent several months at Goudy during 1988, teachers use materials in class long since thrown out in most suburban schools. Slow readers in an eighth grade history class are taught from 15-year-old textbooks in which Richard Nixon is still president. There are no science labs, no art or music teachers. There is no playground. There are no swings. There is no jungle gym. Soap, paper towels and toilet paper are in short supply. There are two working bathrooms for some 700 children.

These children "cry out for something more. . . . They do not get it," says Ms. Brodt, whose *Tribune* article I have relied upon for this description of a school in trouble.

"Keisha, look at me," an adult shouts at a slow reader in a sixth grade class. "Look me in the eye." Keisha has been fighting with her classmate. Over what? As it turns out, over

a crayon. The child is terrified and starts to cry. Tears spill out of her eyes and drop onto the pages of her math book. In January the school begins to ration crayons, pencils, writing paper.

Keisha's teacher is a permanent sub who, according to the *Tribune*, doesn't want to teach this class but has no choice. "It was my turn," the teacher says. "I have a room of 39 overage, unmotivated sixth and seventh graders. . . . I am not prepared for this. I have absolutely no idea of what to do."

"All right, we must read," another teacher at Goudy announces to a third grade class. She stands in the middle of the room, her glasses askew, holding a teacher's manual that tells her what to do. The room is in chaos. A child is passing out red construction paper to her friends. Another is busy at the pencil sharpener.

The teacher looks around and blinks and eyes the child at the pencil sharpener. The child at the pencil sharpener says, "I got to sharpen my pencil."

"Your pencil is sharp," the teacher says.

The child makes a face and breaks her pencil point to spite the teacher.

Three years ago, the *Tribune* explains, this teacher received "official warning" at another elementary school. Transferred here, but finding herself unable to control the class, she was removed in March. Instead of firing her, however, the principal returned her to the children for their morning reading class. It is a class of "academically deficient children." But the teacher does not know how to teach reading.

On the third floor, in a barren-looking room, a teacher observed by the *Tribune's* reporter gives a sharp tongue-lashing to his 33 sixth graders. "If you're stupid, sit there like a dummy," he says to a boy who cannot estimate a quotient.

To punish the children for their poor behavior, he makes them climb and then descend three flights of stairs for half an hour.

"I'm the SOB of the third floor," he says.

The bleakness of the children's lives is underlined by one of Goudy's third grade teachers: "I passed out dictionaries once . . . One of my students started ripping out the pages when he found a word. I said, 'What are you doing?"

You leave the pages there for the next person.' And he told me, 'That's their problem. This is my word.'"

Children who go to school in towns like Glencoe and Winnetka do not need to steal words from a dictionary. Most of them learn to read by second or third grade. By the time they get to sixth or seventh grade, many are reading at the level of the seniors in the best Chicago high schools. By the time they enter ninth grade at New Trier High, they are in a world of academic possibilities that far exceed the hopes and dreams of most schoolchildren in Chicago.

"Our goal is for students to be successful," says the New Trier principal. With 93 percent of seniors going on to four-year colleges—many to schools like Harvard, Princeton, Berkeley, Brown and Yale—this goal is largely realized.

New Trier's physical setting might well make the students of Du Sable High School envious. The *Washington Post* describes a neighborhood of "circular driveways, chirping birds and white-columned homes." It is, says a student, "a maple land of beauty and civility." While Du Sable is sited on one crowded city block, New Trier students have the use of 27 acres. While Du Sable's science students have to settle for makeshift equipment, New Trier's students have superior labs and up-to-date technology. One wing of the school, a physical education center that includes three separate gyms, also contains a fencing room, a wrestling room and studios for dance instruction. In all, the school has seven gyms as well as an Olympic pool.

The youngsters, according to a profile of the school in *Town and Country* magazine, "make good use of the huge, well-equipped building, which is immaculately maintained by a custodial staff of 48."

It is impossible to read this without thinking of a school like Goudy, where there are no science labs, no music or art classes and no playground—and where the two bathrooms, lacking toilet paper, fill the building with their stench.

"This is a school with a lot of choices," says one student at New Trier; and this hardly seems an overstatement if one studies the curriculum. Courses in music, art and drama are so varied and abundant that students can virtually major in

these subjects in addition to their academic programs. The modern and classical language department offers Latin (four years) and six other foreign languages. Elective courses include the literature of Nobel winners, aeronautics, criminal justice, and computer languages. In a senior literature class, students are reading Nietzsche, Darwin, Plato, Freud and Goethe. The school also operates a television station with a broadcast license from the FCC, which broadcasts on four channels to three counties.

Average class size is 24 children; classes for slower learners hold 15. This may be compared to Goudy—where a remedial class holds 39 children and a “gifted” class has 36.

Every freshman at New Trier is assigned a faculty adviser who remains assigned to him or her through graduation. Each of the faculty advisers—they are given a reduced class schedule to allow them time for this—gives counseling to about two dozen children. At Du Sable, where the lack of staff prohibits such reduction in class schedules, each of the guidance counselors advises 420 children.

The ambience among the students at New Trier, of whom only 1.3 percent are black, says *Town and Country*, is “wholesome and refreshing, a sort of throwback to the Fifties.” It is, we are told, “a preppy kind of place.” In a cheerful photo of the faculty and students, one cannot discern a single nonwhite face.

New Trier’s “temperate climate” is “aided by the homogeneity of its students,” *Town and Country* notes. “. . . Almost all are of European extraction and harbor similar values.”

“Eighty to 90 percent of the kids here,” says a counselor, “are good, healthy, red-blooded Americans.”

The wealth of New Trier’s geographical district provides \$340,000 worth of taxable property for each child; Chicago’s property wealth affords only one-fifth this much. Nonetheless, *Town and Country* gives New Trier’s parents credit for a “willingness to pay enough . . . in taxes” to make this one of the state’s best-funded schools. New Trier, according to the magazine, is “a striking example of what is possible when citizens want to achieve the best for their children.” Families move here “seeking the best,” and their children “make good use” of what they’re given. Both state-

ments may be true, but giving people lavish praise for spending what they have strikes one as disingenuous. “A supportive attitude on the part of families in the district translates into a willingness to pay . . .,” the writer says. By this logic, one would be obliged to say that “unsupportive attitudes” on the part of Keisha’s mother and the parents of Du Sable’s children translate into fiscal selfishness, when, in fact, the economic options open to the parents in these districts are not even faintly comparable. *Town and Country* flatters the privileged for having privilege but terms it aspiration.

“Competition is the lifeblood of New Trier,” *Town and Country* writes. But there is one kind of competition that these children will not need to face. They will not compete against the children who attended Goudy and Du Sable. They will compete against each other and against the graduates of other schools attended by rich children. They will not compete against the poor.

It is part of our faith, as Americans, that there is potential in all children. Even among the 700 children who must settle for rationed paper and pencils at Goudy Elementary School, there are surely several dozen, maybe several hundred, who, if given the chance, would thrive and overcome most of the obstacles of poverty if they attended schools like those of Glencoe and Winnetka. We know that very few of them will have that opportunity. Few, as a result, will graduate from high school; fewer still will go to college; scarcely any will attend good colleges. There will be more space for children of New Trier as a consequence.

The denial of opportunity to Keisha and the superfluity of opportunity for children at New Trier High School are not unconnected. The parents of New Trier’s feeder districts vote consistently against redistribution of school funding. By a nine-to-one ratio, according to a recent survey, suburban residents resist all efforts to provide more money for Chicago’s schools.

Efforts at reform of the Chicago schools have been begun with a new wave of optimism every ten or 15 years. The newest wave, a highly publicized restructuring of gov-

erning arrangements that increases the participation of the parents in their children's schools, was launched in 1989. There are those who are convinced that this will someday have a payoff for the children in the poorest schools. Others regard it as a purely mechanistic alteration that cannot address the basic problems of a segregated system isolated by surrounding suburbs which, no matter what the governing arrangements in Chicago, will retain the edge provided by far higher spending and incomparable advantages in physical facilities and teacher salaries. It is, in any case, too soon to draw conclusions. A visitor in 1991, certainly, will see few comprehensive changes for the better.

Certain schools are obviously improved. Goudy, for example, is more cheerful and much better managed than it was three years ago. There is a new principal who seems to be far more demanding of his teachers than his predecessor was, and there are a number of new teachers, and there have been major structural improvements.

Goudy, however, has received so much adverse publicity that it was expected, and predictable, that it would get some extra funds to ward off any further condemnation. School boards, threatened by disturbing reportage, frequently make rapid changes in the schools that are spotlighted by the press. Limited resources guarantee, however, that such changes have to be selective. Extra funds for Goudy's children mean a little less for children somewhere else.

Conditions at Du Sable High School, which I visited in 1990, seem in certain ways to be improved. Improvement, however, is a relative term. Du Sable is better than it was three or four years ago. It is still a school that would be shunned—or, probably, shut down—if it were serving a white middle-class community. The building, a three-story Tudor structure, is in fairly good repair and, in this respect, contrasts with its immediate surroundings, which are almost indescribably despairing. The school, whose student population is 100 percent black, has no campus and no schoolyard, but there is at least a full-sized playing field and track. Overcrowding is not a problem at the school. Much to the reverse, it is uncomfortably empty. Built in 1935 and holding some 4,500 students in past years, its student population is

now less than 1,600. Of these students, according to data provided by the school, 646 are "chronic truants."

The graduation rate is 25 percent. Of those who get to senior year, only 17 percent are in a college-preparation program. Twenty percent are in the general curriculum, while a stunning 63 percent are in vocational classes, which most often rule out college education.

A vivid sense of loss is felt by standing in the cafeteria in early spring when students file in to choose their courses for the following year. "These are the ninth graders," says a supervising teacher; but, of the official freshman class of some 600 children, only 350 fill the room. An hour later the eleventh graders come to choose their classes: I count at most 170 students.

The faculty includes some excellent teachers, but there are others, says the principal, who don't belong in education. "I can't do anything with them but I'm not allowed to fire them," he says, as we head up the stairs to visit classes on a day in early June. Entering a biology class, we find a teacher doing absolutely nothing. She tells us that "some of the students have a meeting," but this doesn't satisfy the principal, who leaves the room irate. In a room he calls "the math headquarters," we come upon two teachers watching a soap opera on TV. In a mathematics learning center, seven kids are gazing out the window while the teacher is preoccupied with something at her desk. The principal again appears disheartened.

Top salary in the school, he says, is \$40,000. "My faculty is aging. Average age is 47. Competing against the suburbs, where the salaries go up to \$60,000, it is very, very hard to keep young teachers. That, you probably know, is an old story. . . . I do insist," he says, "that every student has a book." He says this with some pride and, in the context of Chicago, he has reason to be proud of this; but, in a wealthy nation like America, it is a sad thing to be proud of.

In a twelfth grade English class, the students are learning to pronounce a list of words. The words are not derived from any context; they are simply written on a list. A tall boy struggles hard to read "fastidious," "gregarious," "auspicious," "fatuous." Another reads "dour," "demise," "salu-

brious," "egregious" and "consommé." Still another reads "aesthetic," "schism," "heinous," "fetish," and "concerto." There is something poignant, and embarrassing, about the effort that these barely literate kids put into handling these odd, pretentious words. When the tall boy struggles to pronounce "egregious," I ask him if he knows its meaning. It turns out that he has no idea. The teacher never asks the children to define the words or use them in a sentence. The lesson baffles me. It may be that these are words that will appear on one of those required tests that states impose now in the name of "raising standards," but it all seems dreamlike and surreal.

After lunch I talk with a group of students who are hoping to go on to college but do not seem sure of what they'll need to do to make this possible. Only one out of five seniors in the group has filed an application, and it is already April. Pamela, the one who did apply, however, tells me she neglected to submit her grades and college-entrance test results and therefore has to start again. The courses she is taking seem to rule out application to a four-year college. She tells me she is taking Spanish, literature, physical education, Afro-American history and a class she terms "job strategy." When I ask her what this is, she says, "It teaches how to dress and be on time and figure your deductions." She's a bright, articulate student, and it seems quite sad that she has not had any of the richness of curriculum that would have been given to her at a high school like New Trier.

The children in the group seem not just lacking in important, useful information that would help them to achieve their dreams, but, in a far more drastic sense, cut off and disconnected from the outside world. In talking of some recent news events, they speak of Moscow and Berlin, but all but Pamela are unaware that Moscow is the capital of the Soviet Union or that Berlin is in Germany. Several believe that Jesse Jackson is the mayor of New York City. Listening to their guesses and observing their confusion, I am thinking of the students at New Trier High. These children live in truly separate worlds. What do they have in common? And yet the kids before me seem so innocent and spiritually clean

and also—most of all—so vulnerable. It's as if they have been stripped of all the armament—the words, the reference points, the facts, the reasoning, the elemental weapons—that suburban children take for granted.

At the end of school the principal, Charles Mingo, a heavysset man of 49, stands beside me at a top-floor window and looks out across a line of uniform and ugly 16-story buildings, the Robert Taylor Homes, which constitute, he says, the city's second-poorest neighborhood.

Strutting about beneath us, in the central courtyard of the school, are several peacocks. Most of them are white. A few are black. And two or three are orange-red. The trees and foliage in the courtyard are attractively arranged to give it the appearance of an atrium within an elegant hotel.

"There's so little beauty in my students' lives. I want these kids to come to school and find a little space of something pastoral and lovely. If I had a lot of money I would empty out three of those high-rise buildings, put up a fence and build a residential school. I'd run me a pastoral prep school in the middle of Chicago. Tear another building down. Plant some trees, some grass, some flowers. Build me a patio around a pool. Grow some ivy on those walls. I'd call it Hyde Park West. . . .

"I spent a summer once at Phillips Academy in Massachusetts. Beautiful brick buildings. Trees and lawns. Students walking by those buildings, so at home there, utterly relaxed. I thought to myself: My students need this more than people like George Bush."

He tells me that there is a horticulture teacher in the school. "He's the one that tends the patio. He and the children in his class. That's the kind of thing the back-to-basics folks do not find to their liking. Making flowers grow, I'm told, is not 'essential' and will not improve their chances of employment. 'Get these kids to pass their tests! Forget about the flowers!' We need jobs, of course we do; but we need flowers."

On the wall of his office is a photograph of Martin Luther King surrounded by police within a crowd of angry-looking people. Next to Dr. King there is a heavysset black

man who has been clubbed or pushed down to the street. "That was right here in Chicago. That big man there next to Dr. King—"

"That's you?" I ask.

"No. That's my daddy."

He tells me that the photograph was taken in North Lawndale. "It was an open-housing march. My daddy was his bodyguard. It was a march to Cicero. He got turned back. One of his few defeats. . . ."

"What he managed in the South he could not pull off in Chicago. He couldn't march to Cicero. Police would not permit it. They were sure he would be killed. In certain ways that picture says it all. This is where the struggle stopped. You see the consequence around you in this school."

"It took an extraordinary combination of greed, racism, political cowardice and public apathy," writes James D. Squires, the former editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, "to let the public schools in Chicago get so bad." He speaks of the schools as a costly result of "the political orphaning of the urban poor . . . daytime warehouses for inferior students . . . a bottomless pit."

The results of these conditions are observed in thousands of low-income children in Chicago who are virtually disjoined from the entire worldview, even from the basic reference points, of the American experience. A 16-year-old girl who has dropped out of school discusses her economic prospects with a TV interviewer.

"How much money would you like to make in a year?" asks the reporter.

"About \$2,000," she replies.

The reporter looks bewildered by this answer. This teen-age girl, he says, "has no clue that \$2,000 a year isn't enough to survive anywhere in America, not even in her world."

This sad young woman, who already has a baby and is pregnant once again, lives in a truly separate universe of clouded hopes and incomplete cognition. "We are creating an entire generation of incompetents," a black sociologist

observes. "Her kids will fail. There is a good chance that she'll end up living with a man who is addicted or an alcoholic. She'll be shot or killed, or else her children will be shot or killed, or else her boyfriend will be shot or killed. Drugs will be overwhelmingly attractive to a person living in a world so bare of richness or amenities. No one will remember what we did to her when she was eight years old in elementary school or 15 years old at Du Sable High. No one will remember that her mother might have tried and failed to get her into Head Start when she was a baby. Who knows if her mother even got prenatal care? She may be brain-damaged—or lead-poisoned. Who will ask these questions later on? They will see her as a kind of horrible deformity. Useless too. Maybe a maid. Maybe not. Maybe just another drain upon society."

The students of Du Sable High School are, of course, among the poorest in America. New Trier's children are among the richest. But New Trier is not the only high school in Chicago's suburbs that spends vast amounts of money to assure superb results; nor are Chicago's schools the only ones where poor results and grossly insufficient funding coincide. In 1987, for example, Proviso High School, serving children in the black suburban town of Maywood, spent only about \$5,000 for each pupil: virtually the same as what was spent on high school students in Chicago, but \$3,000 less than what was spent on children in the highest-spending suburb.

But even Maywood's underfunded schools are not the poorest in the area around Chicago. In East Aurora, Illinois, in 1987, a little girl in the fourth grade received an education costing \$2,900. Meanwhile, a little boy the same age in the town of Niles could expect some \$7,800 to be spent on each year of his elementary education—a figure that would rise to \$8,950 in his secondary years.

Over the course of 13 years, from kindergarten to twelfth grade, \$38,000 would be spent on the first child's education, and over \$100,000 on the second child's education. If the former child should become one of the casualties of the high dropout rate at East Aurora High, she would receive significantly less—as little as \$30,000 worth of edu-

cation. There was a good chance, moreover, that this child would not finish school. The dropout rate at East Aurora High was 35 percent. In Niles, it was less than 2 percent.

The focus in this book is on the inner-city schools; inevitably, therefore, I am describing classrooms in which almost all the children are black or Latino. But there are also poor and mainly white suburban districts and, of course, some desperately poor and very isolated rural districts. Children in the rural districts of Kentucky, northern Maine, and Arkansas, for instance, face a number of the problems we have seen in East St. Louis and Chicago, though the nature of the poverty in rural schools is often somewhat different. The most important difference in the urban systems, I believe, is that they are often just adjacent to the nation's richest districts, and this ever-present contrast adds a heightened bitterness to the experience of children. The ugliness of racial segregation adds its special injuries as well. It is this killing combination, I believe, that renders life within these urban schools not merely grim but also desperate and often pathological. The fact of destitution is compounded by the sense of being viewed as, somehow, morally infected. The poorest rural schools I've visited feel, simply, bleak. The segregated urban schools feel more like lazarettos.

A recent emphasis of certain business-minded authors writing about children in the kinds of schools we have examined in Chicago urges us to settle for "realistic" goals, by which these authors mean the kinds of limited career objectives that seem logical or fitting for low-income children. Many corporate leaders have resisted this idea, and there are some who hold out high ideals and truly democratic hopes for these low-income children; but other business leaders speak quite openly of "training" kids like these for nothing better than the entry-level jobs their corporations have available. Urban schools, they argue, should dispense with "frills" and focus on "the basics" needed for employment. Emphasis in the suburban schools, they add, should necessarily be more expansive, with a focus upon college preparation.

Investment strategies, according to this logic, should be matched to the potential economic value of each person.

Future service workers need a different and, presumably, a lower order of investment than the children destined to be corporate executives, physicians, lawyers, engineers. Future plumbers and future scientists require different schooling—maybe different schools. Segregated education is not necessarily so unattractive by this reasoning.

Early testing to assign each child to a "realistic" course of study, the tracking of children by ability determined by the tests, and the expansion of a parallel system for the children who appear to show the greatest promise (gifted classes and selective schools) are also favored from this vantage point. In terms of sheer efficiency and of cost-benefit considerations, it is a sensible approach to education. If children are seen primarily as raw material for industry, a greater investment in the better raw material makes sense. Market values do not favor much investment in the poorest children.

One cannot dispute the fact that giving poor black adolescents job skills, if it is self-evident that they do not possess the academic skills to go to college, is a good thing in itself. But the business leaders who put emphasis on filling entry-level job slots are too frequently the people who, by prior lobbying and voting patterns and their impact upon social policy, have made it all but certain that few of these urban kids would get the education in their early years that would have made them *look* like college prospects by their secondary years. First we circumscribe their destinies and then we look at the diminished product and we say, "Let's be pragmatic and do with them what we can."

The evolution of two parallel curricula, one for urban and one for suburban schools, has also underlined the differences in what is felt to be appropriate to different kinds of children and to socially distinct communities. "This school is right for this community," says a former director of student services at New Trier High. But, he goes on, "it certainly wouldn't be right for every community." What is considered right for children at Du Sable and their counterparts in other inner-city schools becomes self-evident to anyone who sees the course of study in such schools. Many urban high school students do not study math but "business math"—essentially, a very elemental level of bookkeeping.

Job-specific courses such as "cosmetology" (hairdressing, manicures), which would be viewed as insults by suburban parents, are a common item in the segregated high schools and are seen as realistic preparation for the adult roles that 16-year-old black girls may expect to fill.

Inevitably this thinking must diminish the horizons and the aspirations of poor children, locking them at a very early age into the slots that are regarded as appropriate to their societal position. On its darkest side, it also leads to greater willingness to write off certain children. "It doesn't make sense to offer something that most of these urban kids will never use," a businessman said to me flatly in Chicago. "No one expects these ghetto kids to go to college. Most of them are lucky if they're even literate. If we can teach some useful skills, get them to stay in school and graduate, and maybe into jobs, we're giving them the most that they can hope for."

"Besides," a common line of reasoning continues, "these bottom-level jobs exist. They need to be done. Somebody's got to do them." It is evident, however, who that somebody will be. There is no sentimentalizing here. No corporate CEO is likely to confess a secret wish to see his children trained as cosmetologists or clerical assistants. So the prerogatives of class and caste are clear.

Some years ago, New Trier High School inaugurated an "office education" course that offered instruction in shorthand, filing and typing. "It was an acknowledged flop," the *Washington Post* reports. Not enough students were enrolled. The course was discontinued. "I guess," a teacher said, kids at New Trier "just don't think of themselves as future secretaries."

What does money buy for children in Chicago's suburbs?

At the wealthiest suburban schools it buys them truly scholarly instruction from remarkable and well-rewarded teachers, and it also buys them a great deal of thoughtful counseling from well-prepared advisers. In the suburbs, says the *Chicago Sun-Times*, "it is not uncommon for the ratio between students and counselors to be 250 to one," and, at its lowest, at New Trier, where, as we have seen, faculty mem-

bers are released from teaching to give counseling, it is only 25 to one. "In the city the ratio is 400 to one." While a suburban school library is likely to have 60,000 volumes, a Chicago school library "is lucky to have 13,000 volumes," says the *Sun-Times*. "In the suburbs, extracurricular activities are supported as an integral part of education, and summer school tends to be standard. In the city, both were sliced thin years ago as money became tight."

Is money the main difference?

It is obviously the difference in provision of school libraries: 60,000 books cost four and a half times as much as 13,000 books.

It is, at least in part, the difference in attracting gifted and experienced teachers: Teachers earning nearly \$60,000 cost a system half again as much as teachers earning \$40,000. The differences, by any standard, are enormous.

"Of course one might assert," John Coons observes, "that, though money may be a good measure of quality, this could hold true for rich districts only." From this point of view, "these children of poor districts" can absorb "only the most rudimentary" and "inexpensive" instruction. "Rich children," on the other hand, "are capable of soaking up the most esoteric offering. Hence it is proper to prefer them in spending."

The "gross condescension of this argument," he says, "should be enough to condemn it" but "it is regrettably persistent in important private circles."

Even accepting, he continues, "that you 'get less for your money' with poor children, this doesn't mean such children haven't the right to equal schools." True, he says, "equal opportunity across the board" will not automatically "produce equality" in school performance. Still, "one doesn't force a losing baseball team to play with seven men."

Not surprisingly, when parents of poor children or their advocates raise their voices to protest the rigging of the game, they ask initially for things that seem like fairly obvious improvements: larger library collections, a reduction in the size of classes, or a better ratio of children to school counselors. What seems obvious to them, however, is by no means obvious to those who have control over their chil-

dren's destinies, and the arguments these parents make are often met with flat rebuttals.

In 1988 a number of Chicago's more responsive leaders told the press that cutting class size ought to be a top priority and indicated it would cost about \$100 million to begin to do this. The rebuttal started almost instantly. Efforts to improve a school by lowering its class size, said Assistant U.S. Secretary of Education Chester Finn, would be a "costly waste of money." Reducing class size is "not a very prudent investment strategy," said Mr. Finn, who sent his daughter to Exeter, where class size is 13. "There are a lot of better and less costly things you can do and get results."

Around the same time, Education Secretary William Bennett came to Illinois and told taxpayers, "If the citizens of Chicago [want to] put more money in, then they are free to do so. But you will not buy your way to better performance."

Is this left true?
The *New York Times* responded to the views of Mr. Bennett with this observation: "Parents who have scrimped to send their children to private school" or voted for higher taxes to improve their local public schools "may be confused by the Education Department's recent statements. . . . According to the department's fourth annual statistical picture of the nation's public schools, the amount spent per pupil, on higher teacher salaries or on improving the teacher-student ratio has almost no correlation with performance." This, said the *Times*, bolsters "the message [Mr. Bennett] has been preaching: Money is not primarily 'what works' in education."

In Chicago, where the issue had been posed, the question was now asked: If money and class size did not matter, then what other changes might be helpful to the city's poorest children? The *Chicago Tribune*, after doing a superb job of describing the inequities that faced Chicago's children, seemed to be dissuaded by the words of Mr. Finn and Mr. Bennett. Instead of proposing answers to the problems stemming from short funding that it had so candidly described, the paper now backed off and made a recommendation that did not apply directly to the public schools at all.

"What would make measurable improvement . . .," said

the *Tribune*, "would be a major expansion of early childhood programs." Unlike costlier proposals, said the paper, preschool education "pays off in measurable ways—not only in improved achievement but also in tax savings." What the *Tribune* failed to say was that this "better" solution—preschool guarantees for all poor children, which, of course, would be too late for 12-year-olds like Keisha—had been turned down by the president who had appointed Mr. Finn and Mr. Bennett, and that a similar statewide plan for Illinois had recently been vetoed by the governor.

Thus it is that what poor people, in a plain and simple way, had felt impelled to ask for was declared the "wrong" solution. What they did not ask for at that moment (but had asked for, only to be turned down, many times before) was now declared the "right" solution. But neither solution, in any case, was going to be funded. A balancing act of equally unlikely options was the only answer that the city and the nation gave to the requests of these poor people. This juggling of options—in this instance, countering school-funding efforts with the need for preschool—does no good if neither of these options is to be enacted anyway and if the act of balancing only serves to guarantee our permanent inaction in both areas.

It is also fair to ask what rule it is that says poor children in Chicago have to choose between a glass of milk when they are three years old or a glass of milk when they are seven. The children of Winnetka do not have to make this choice. They get the best of preschool and the smallest class size in their elementary schools (and they also get superior health care, and they also get a lot of milk). This is like exhorting Keisha, "You can have more crayons; or you can be given a real teacher; or you can have a bunsen burner someday in a high school science laboratory. But you cannot have all three. You'll have to choose."

One would not have thought that children in America would ever have to choose between a teacher or a playground or sufficient toilet paper. Like grain in a time of famine, the immense resources which the nation does in fact possess go not to the child in the greatest need but to the child of the highest bidder—the child of parents who, more

frequently than not, have also enjoyed the same abundance when they were schoolchildren.

"A caste society," wrote U.S. Commissioner of Education Francis Keppel 25 years ago, "violates the style of American democracy. . . . The nation in effect does not have a truly public school system in a large part of its communities; it has permitted what is in effect a private school system to develop under public auspices. . . . Equality of educational opportunity throughout the nation continues today for many to be more a myth than a reality." This statement is as true today as it was at the time when it was written. For all the rhetoric of school reform that we have heard in recent years, there are no indications that this is about to change.

City and state business associations, in Chicago as in many other cities, have lobbied for years against tax increments to finance education of low-income children. "You don't dump a lot of money into guys who haven't done well with the money they've got in the past," says the chief executive officer of Citicorps Savings of Illinois. "You don't rearrange deck chairs on the Titanic."

In recent years, however, some of the corporate leaders in Chicago who opposed additional school funding and historically resisted efforts at desegregation have nonetheless attempted to portray themselves as allies to poor children—or, as they sometimes call themselves, "school partners"—and they even offer certain kinds of help. Some of the help they give is certainly of use, although it is effectively the substitution of a form of charity, which can be withheld at any time, for the more permanent assurances of justice; but much of what the corporations do is simply superficial and its worth absurdly overstated by the press.

Celebrities are sometimes hired, for example, by the corporations to come into the Chicago schools and organize a rally to sell children on the wisdom of not dropping out of school. A local counterpart to Jesse Jackson often gives a motivational address. He tells the kids, "You are somebody." They are asked to chant it in response. But the fact that they are in this school, and doomed to be here for no reason other than their race and class, gives them a different message: "In

the eyes of this society, you are not much at all." This is the message they get every day when no celebrities are there and when their business partners have departed for their homes in the white suburbs.

Business leaders seem to have great faith in exhortation of this kind—a faith that comes perhaps from marketing traditions. Exhortation has its role. But hope cannot be marketed as easily as blue jeans. Human liberation doesn't often come this way—from mass hypnosis. Certain realities—race and class and caste—are there, and they remain.

Not surprisingly, the notion that such private-sector boosterism offers a solution to the miseries of education for poor children is not readily accepted by some parents in Chicago who have seen what private-sector forces have achieved in housing, in employment and in medical provision for their children. "The same bank presidents who offer gifts to help our segregated schools," a mother in Chicago said, "are the ones who have assured their segregation by redlining neighborhoods like these for 30 years, and they are the ones who send their kids to good schools in Winnetka and who vote against the equalizing plans to give our public schools more money. Why should we trust their motives? They may like to train our children to be good employees. That would make their businesses more profitable. Do they want to see our children taking corporate positions from their children? If they gave our kids what their kids have, we might earn enough to move into their neighborhoods."

The phrasing "private-sector partner" is employed somewhat disarmingly in corporate pronouncements, but the language does not always strike responsive chords among sophisticated leaders of the poor. "These people aren't my children's friends," said the woman I have quoted in Chicago. "What have things come to in America when I am told they are the people that I have to trust? If they want to be my 'partner,' let them open up their public schools and bring my children out into their neighborhoods to go to school beside their children. Let them use their money to buy buses, not to hold expensive conferences in big hotels. If they think that busing is too tiring for poor black children—I do find it interesting that they show so much concern for poor black

children—I don't mind if they would like to go for limousines. But do not lock us in a place where you don't need to live beside us and then say you want to be my 'partner.' I don't accept that kind of 'partner.' No one would—unless he was a fool or had no choice."

But that is the bitter part of it. The same political figures who extol the role of business have made certain that these poor black people would have no real choice. Cutting back the role of government and then suggesting that the poor can turn to businessmen who lobbied for such cuts is cynical indeed. But many black principals in urban schools know very well that they have no alternative; so they learn to swallow their pride, subdue their recognitions and their dignity, and frame their language carefully to win the backing of potential "business partners." At length they are even willing to adjust their schools and their curricula to serve the corporate will: as the woman in Chicago said, to train the ghetto children to be good employees. This is an accomplished fact today. A new generation of black urban school officials has been groomed to settle for a better version of unequal segregated education.

The Savage Inequalities of Public Education in New York

In a country where there is no distinction of class," Lord Acton wrote of the United States 130 years ago, "a child is not born to the station of its parents, but with an indefinite claim to all the prizes that can be won by thought and labor. It is in conformity with the theory of equality . . . to give as near as possible to every youth an equal state in life." Americans, he said, "are unwilling that any should be deprived in childhood of the means of competition."

It is hard to read these words today without a sense of irony and sadness. Denial of "the means of competition" is perhaps the single most consistent outcome of the education offered to poor children in the schools of our large cities; and nowhere is this pattern of denial more explicit or more absolute than in the public schools of New York City.

Average expenditures per pupil in the city of New York in 1987 were some \$5,500. In the highest spending suburbs of New York (Great Neck or Manhasset, for example, on Long Island) funding levels rose above \$11,000, with the